

MY SAY: We don't know that we don't know

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I was privileged to be invited to talk at The World Wireless Research Forum (WWRF) held in Penang recently. Being a global event, the forum was attended by heavyweights in the wireless sector — both commercial and academic — and by regulators such as the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission.

As an organisation, the forum was founded in August 2001, and to date has over 140 members from five continents representing all sectors of the mobile communications industry and the research community. The objective of the forum is reportedly to formulate visions on strategic future research directions in the wireless field, among industry and academia, and to generate, identify and promote research areas and technical trends for mobile and wireless system technologies. It hopes to develop a common global vision for the future of wireless to drive research and standardisation.

As the theme of the WWRF was "Wireless *sans* Frontier: Reaching Out To Humanity", I raised a point of concern in my speech: "Is wireless technology reaching out to humanity on the health frontier?" And I illustrated my point using our experience with Big Tobacco over the last 50 years.

Initially, tobacco was regarded as a novelty, indeed something that only the rich and famous could indulge in. Thus, doctors, nurses, Santa Clause as well as celebrities like Ronald Reagan were among those who gave the use of tobacco the thumbs up. Soon enough, cigarette smoking became the norm and a status symbol.

Obviously, we didn't know that we didn't know the product was hazardous to health. In fact, smoking was promoted as fun and delicious in advertisements.

We now know the opposite to be the truth. Tobacco is a killer, a destroyer of health, and those who promote its use are no less than merchants of death.

Unfortunately, tobacco took a firm grip on many of its users who became addicted to it. In 1988, addiction to tobacco was documented as being in the same league as heroin and cocaine, which were banned as illegal drugs of abuse. Tobacco however continued to exist as a "legal" drug of abuse, to be promoted everywhere. Undoubtedly, this is the best marketing strategy for any industry — get your customers addicted, literally, to your product and its sales will skyrocket for sure.

So much so that Big Tobacco became a powerful and influential lot. Linked to political lobbyists, it became almost invincible. Until, of course, the truth caught up with it, backed by some hard scientific facts. By then, millions of lives had been lost prematurely while millions more were hooked on tobacco use, including innocent children. A large proportion of this tragedy was also happening in developing countries.

Yet, in their oath to the US Congress in 1994, the bosses of Big Tobacco defiantly said they did not believe tobacco was addictive. This time, they knew that they knew but they chose to lie through their teeth.

The question is, will Big Telcos be different? Like tobacco in the past, hard facts about wireless devices are illusive. We still don't know that we don't know about them, especially with regard to health. But their presence is pervasive already.

Shouldn't there be written warnings about the potential dangers of wireless devices, just like on cigarette boxes these days? Shouldn't vendors be compelled to provide educational material on the safe use of these devices? At least for children, for whom there is growing evidence of harm and danger from wireless devices. This is why some enlightened governments are taking serious steps to protect children from the possible ill effects of wireless technology.

More alarming is the emergence of addiction problems among children and youngsters hooked on cellular phones and the Internet, two of the most common wireless technologies in developing countries, not unlike tobacco usage. In the worst-case scenario, millions will face a variety of health problems, this time affecting mainly the head region instead of the thorax. We are still grappling with tobacco addiction and now may be on the threshold of another if we are not careful.

So, why not learn from the past and really reach out to humanity about something that really matters — health protection. Even more so at a time when Malaysia is keen to increase its broadband penetration and when we still don't know what we don't know.

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